

What does God require?

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[0:00] Well-known verses from the prophet Micah.! Love mercy and walk humbly with your God.

As we come to the centre of this chapter now, justice and mercy and faithfulness are what we find at the centre. And we'll be looking at that, but we need to put it into context as always.

We started looking at this chapter last week, and we covered rather a lot of ground, and actually some people said it was a bit hard to follow it all. So I'm just going to briefly take stock and just summarise what I said last week in order to put this part into context.

So there are, this is Jesus' last public address. There are six or possibly seven woes in this chapter, depending on how you count them. The hearers are both the disciples and the Jewish leaders.

So verses 1 to 12 seem to be aimed mainly at the disciples, and verses 13 to 36 are the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. But it seems that I think both groups were intended to hear the whole thing.

[1:42] As I've divided the text up as follows, verses 1 to 12 form a kind of introduction. And then what I've numbered the first two woes, the keys to the kingdom and the question of parentage, verses 13 and 15, which are about access to the kingdom.

And then the passage we're going to be looking at this week is from verses 16 to 24, which talks about blind guides, but also gets to the heart of what the law of Moses is.

And then as Jesus moves on through his address we'll be looking at in the next couple of weeks, he has things to say about hypocrisy and about killing the prophets and whitewashing the tombs of the righteous, but also about who is actually buried in these tombs.

And in that first section we looked at last week, Jesus accuses the Pharisees of not practicing what they preach. And as I said last week, of course this charge to some extent applies to any teacher except Christ himself.

And in a sense that means proclaiming, thus says the Lord, very difficult. But we can do it, as he goes on to explain in the first 12 verses, by remembering that really there is only one teacher.

[3:06] And as I said, of course, teaching is one of the gifts of the Spirit. It was on the list that we were looking at this morning. And so, of course, there are gifts of teaching in the church. But that ultimately there is only the one teacher.

And that is Christ himself. Because he is the only teacher who can entirely say that he did exactly what he said. It was entirely consistent in his ministry.

And he reminds us that both preacher and hearer are brothers and sisters, learning from that one source of instruction. And he contrasts that, of course, to the Jewish leaders who claimed to be sitting in the seat of Moses.

But actually had usurped Moses' spiritual authority by taking it for themselves, effectively, what he says in verse 4. Putting heavy loaves on men's shoulders that Moses hadn't imposed on them, making life difficult for their hearers.

And then, last week, we went on to look at the first two woes in verses 13 to 15. And as I said, they were about access to the kingdom of heaven. And the point here was that the Jewish leaders were not acting as honest border guards, allowing those in who should have been allowed in.

[4:30] But instead, they were behaving like people traffickers, slavers. Those who they tried to claim to admit to the kingdom were actually being sold into slavery.

And he says they made them even more a son of hell than you are yourself. And we looked at this idea of who truly has the key to the kingdom and reminded ourselves that the key of David is held by Jesus himself, who's described exactly in that way in Revelation 3, verse 7.

But that he has entrusted that key to his church, as he says in Matthew 16, 18 and 19. So we're now going to move on to verses 16 to 24.

And as it were at this point, we've crossed the border into the kingdom. But as we move into the heartland, we need a guide.

And the question that's addressed here is who is competent to show us around, to point out the important features, to warn us about dangerous places, and to do all the other things that a guide should do.

[5:46] And Jesus says that it's not the scribes and Pharisees who do that. They should have been. That's what they should have been doing. But he describes them as blind.

And it's worth reminding us of itself. It's not being blind as such that makes them guilty. In John 9, 41, Jesus said, If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin.

But now you claim you can see, your guilt remains. Of course, a blind person is worthy of compassion. But a blind person who sets up in business as a mountain guide is something different indeed, isn't it?

He's going to be guilty when the tourists are caught in the avalanche or when they fall into a crevasse. To claim a competence we do not and indeed cannot have is a blameworthy thing. And so, as Jesus said, because they claim they could see, they claim to be guides, that's what made them guilty. And in these two woes, Jesus digs a little deeper into the theology, if you like, the teaching of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law.

[7:05] And of course, his main basic theme throughout this discourse is that the Jews' religion is all about externals. It says that in verse 5. And it pops up again here.

But here he does probe a little deeper into their teaching. And it's worth following this up a bit more closely. Why?

Well, because we want to make sure, don't we, that we don't fall into the same trap. That we are not ourselves blind guides. And so, it's worth looking to see exactly what Jesus criticizes them for. And what trap there is to avoid. So, I thought you could think of this as two marks of fake spirituality. Or if you think that seems a bit negative, you could say these, in a sense, are two tests that are Christianity, that what we teach, is authentic. But I put it on the slide there as two tests for fake spirituality.

[8:11] And we note here as we go into this that the problem with the Pharisees, their error was not any form of gross idolatry.

In many ways, their theology was quite close to that of Jesus himself. And yet, there were things in it which made it a world away. The errors that they made were not, perhaps, totally obvious ones. The teachings seem to have an emphasis on holiness and on the law of Moses. But Jesus points out that it fails to meet the required standard in two respects.

And so, let's see what those are. And the first issue seems a bit strange. It might not have been quite what we expected. I mean, does it really matter if you swear by the temple or the goal of the temple?

Whether you swear by the altar or the sacrifice? But if you look closely, you can see that's not actually the point that Jesus is making. He does say things about oaths in other occasions.

[9:18] But that's not the point he's making here. The point he's making here is that these distinctions that they're coming up with don't actually make sense. That's what he says in verse 17, isn't it?

They've become fools. They've become blind fools. Why? What can we say? Well, there's nothing intrinsically holy about gold paneling, isn't it?

You could find gold paneling in palaces and temples everywhere. If that particular paneling is holy, it's because the occupant of that particular temple is holy.

And similarly, there's nothing holy about a dead animal, is there? Those can be found in meat markets anywhere. If a particular slain lamb is holy, it's because it's offered as a sacrifice to the Lord.

So what Jesus is saying here is that these alleged teachers, these spiritual giants, as they're claiming, are actually talking nonsense in the most literal sense of the term.

[10:30] And here is a lesson for teachers, isn't it? Surely, whatever other qualifications there must be for a teacher, the first requirement of a teacher is that what you say actually makes sense.

Several years ago now, some of you may remember an American TV lawyer series called Ali McBeal. I was quite a fan at the time. And on one occasion, I remember that the heroine, Ali, asked a colleague about the logic of a particular case.

And the colleague responded with this line, which has remained in my memory ever since. He says, this is a sexual harassment case. It doesn't have to make sense.

But of course it does, doesn't it? But unfortunately, there are many around today who would reply in very similar terms about Christian doctrine.

And they're not just among the new atheists either. Too many Christians, or those who claim to be Christians, seem to take the attitude, this is spirituality. It doesn't have to make sense.

[11:45] But look what Jesus has to say. Those whose religious pronouncements fail this test of simple logic. He calls them blind fools. You blind fools.

Which is greater? The gold or the temple that makes the gold sacred? A fool is somebody who's failed to understand, as even the basic principles has got completely the wrong end of the stick, as we say.

Yes, it does need to make sense. There's nothing spiritual about nonsense. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 14, The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets, for God is not a God of disorder, but of peace.

And if you look at what he means there, disorder, he means things that don't really make sense. Now, we need to be careful here.

It's not to say that the truth is always simple. Sometimes there are subtleties that it's hard to get our head around. There are things that puzzle us.

[12:51] Obvious things, perhaps, like the free offer of the gospel, together with the doctrine of election. They may puzzle us, but that doesn't mean to say that we can say things that don't make sense.

But much of today's supposed spiritual leadership, I think, actually fails this simple test. Just forget pointless pronouncements on ecumenism, as if you can somehow generate unity just by declaring it into existence, whether it actually has any logic to it at all.

We get these peculiar things that people talk about, like slaying in the spirit, for instance. What's that about? Does that mean anything?

Or what about these prosperity gospelers who take odd texts out of context and twist them to mean something entirely different to what they actually mean?

There are always those who have put some other priority ahead of the simple requirement to make sense, to join up the dots, show where the logic takes you.

[14:02] In fact, this tendency to feel rather than to think, to prefer spin and slogan to truth, is one of the worst aspects of the spirit of this age, I think.

Just ask how much actual logic has applied to politics nowadays, Brexit or the American election, and you find precious little on either side.

It's all about perception. It's all about feeling. Apparently, it doesn't have to make sense anymore.

Only it does. And the church should be the advocate of sound thinking and wisdom. We remember that the fear of the Lord, we're told, is the beginning of wisdom.

We sometimes think of the first bit and forget what the fear of the Lord is the beginning of. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. And yet the church is often among the worst offenders at spouting nonsense of one sort or another.

[15:19] If we just need to get people in the churches, who cares if what they hear actually makes sense? But that's exactly what the Pharisees were doing, wasn't it? They were getting people into the churches.

They would traverse land and sea, it says, to do that. But what they were teaching simply didn't make sense. It was folly.

It was nonsense. It does matter. It does have to make sense. And Jesus is very clear on that issue. But the second criticism is even deeper.

The next woe. And that is that it actually, they're completely missing the point. Claiming to be the successors of Moses, these guides have actually turned the law of Moses inside out.

It's exactly what he says in verse 23, isn't it? Verse 23 says, It's just ridiculous, isn't it?

[16:50] That's what he's saying. So we get this really absurd metaphor. You know, you pick out a tiny insect from your soup, but you're quite prepared to swallow this enormous animal that somebody's put in there.

I mean, it's absurd and it's meant to be absurd. Of course, he's saying that what they're doing is absurd. This woe actually takes us to the heart of the gospel.

It's framed in terms of the law of Moses, because that's what the Pharisees claimed to be interpreting. But it actually goes deeper even than adherence to the law, because that message of Micah's prophecy and the other Old Testament prophets is clear.

And in fact, I think that provides the link with the rest of the woes. I think that's why he goes on to talk about, to you who murdered the prophets. But let's pause and focus on this particular one.

Let me read you those words of Micah again. He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

[18:06] What is it that God really requires of mankind? When Jesus talks about placing heavy burdens on people, verse 4, I don't think he's thinking about tithing herbs.

I mean, actually, tithing herbs is fairly easy. The Pharisees were pretty good at it themselves, it seems. That's not the burden that Jesus says the Pharisees were laying on people.

There's nothing heavy about cumin. You can buy it in little bottles. But Peter comments, this is Acts 15, verse 10.

Why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? He's not thinking about minor regulations, except insofar as those minor regulations pointed towards weightier matters.

Jesus does say you shouldn't have neglected the tithing either. But that's not the important part. It's not that by counting seeds, the Pharisees were making things too hard for the people.

[19:19] It's actually that they were eviscerating the law, taking the important part of it out. They were making things, in fact, far too easy for themselves, in one sense.

Jesus had earlier said, Matthew 5, 20, I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

The Pharisees were making external regulations the marker of the covenant, the sign of God's favor, while they were rejecting that steadfast love and mercy in which the covenant was based. You can't measure, you can't weigh justice. On the contrary, justice weighs everything else. You can't measure mercy.

But mercy measures every action. And faithfulness is not a regulation of law.

[20:30] In a sense, it can't be, because that's to put the cart before the horse, as we say. Faithfulness is the foundation on which law is based. And I think we need to be a bit careful here, because in English we have three words.

We talk about belief, we talk about faith, and we talk about faithfulness. And in English they have slightly different meanings. But in fact, in Greek, they're all the same word, pistis.

So while faithfulness, I'm sure, is clearly the basic meaning here, I think we should actually be careful of making a distinction that the original text doesn't actually make.

It's belief in law, in the goodness of law, which makes the law work. And in a sense, that's what faith is, because if you lose sight of that, if you attempt to impose law from the outside, then it becomes tyranny, doesn't it?

And I suggest to you, this is what the Pharisees were doing. This was their heavy burden, that we read of in verse 4. And in so far as the law of Moses had failed, and both the Old Testament prophets and the New Testament writers agree that, in a sense, it had, it has failed because its adherents had forgotten the faithfulness and the faith of Moses.

[21:59] It was Moses' faith, Moses' trust in God, Moses' obedience to God, that had led to the law being given. And if they'd not forgotten that, then perhaps there would have been no need for the new covenant that Jeremiah prophesies in chapter 31, verse 31, one of the easy references to remember, Jeremiah 31, 31, where he says that there will be a new covenant which is written in men's hearts.

Still, we might ask, I mean, we're evangelicals, aren't we? Surely none of this is relevant to us. We wouldn't do that, would we? I imagine that tithing dill is not high on your list of religious priorities. Do you go around with a marker in your spice cupboard and mark off the bottom 10%? I doubt it. But if the temptation for the Pharisees was to take faithfulness out of the law, then the temptation for Christians, perhaps, is to take the law out of faith.

And James warns us of this, doesn't he? In quite an extended passage. I'm just going to read a few verses for it, but you might want to have your Bible open there. So it is on page...

I've now lost it. 8, 5, 5... Yeah, thank you. 8, 5... No, that can't...

[23:32] That's the wrong... I think in most of the Bibles, it's around 1, 2, 1, 4. I'm not going to read the whole passage, but I am going to pick a few verses out of this passage.

So first of all, let's note James 2, verse 14. What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds?

Can such faith save him? Then a few verses later, he illustrates this point. James 2, 19 says, You believe that there is one God.

Good. Even the demons believe that and shudder. Then a few verses later, James 2, 21 to 24. Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?

You see that his faith and his actions were working together and his faith was made complete by what he did. And the scripture was fulfilled that says, Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness.

[24:44] And he was called God's friend. You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone. Now, as evangelicals, of course, are all very aware that in Romans, Paul talks about justification by faith alone.

But I want to make the point that James isn't contradicting Paul here. In fact, they're actually saying exactly the same thing in slightly different language.

Just to make that clear, look again into James. James 2, verse 10. It says, For whoever keeps the whole law of God and yet stumbles just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.

These words are not Paul, but James, James is saying you can't be justified by the works of the law because you're going to slip up somewhere.

The fact, you know, if I set fire to the building, the fact that I haven't committed murder or burglary, I'm still a criminal. As James says, you can't, no one is able to keep the whole law because if you stumble at just one point, you've broken the law and in a sense, you've broken all of it.

[26:01] These are the words of James, not Paul or Peter. And again, it's James who writes in James 2, 12 to 13, Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful.

Mercy triumphs over judgment. But that raises the question, doesn't it? How are we justified by faith alone? How does mercy triumph over judgment?

So let's think about that point a bit. And I think we have to bear in mind that when James writes on faith, when Paul writes on faith, a lot of the issue is about what faith actually is and conversely what it isn't.

And I think if we understand what Paul says and what James says in those terms, then indeed we will not see them as contradicting each other but rather, as I say, saying the same thing just in slightly different language.

So what isn't faith? The first thing is that faith isn't acceptance of a set of propositions.

[27:31] It isn't ticking off a list of truths. Because as James reminds even the demons could do that. But if they do that, they tremble.

But that's certainly one trap that evangelicals have fallen into in the past, I think. But more nowadays, there is a tendency which goes back to what we were thinking about earlier, about it having to make sense.

there is a tendency to make faith mean a kind of glow of well-being, a kind of warm feeling about the presence of God or I might say the alleged presence of God.

Faith ultimately isn't something you feel, it is something you do, something you believe. But faith is neither of those things.

And to make it that is actually to fall into the same trap of the Pharisees by making it too simple and in making it too simple actually making it impossible.

[28:54] Making, if we went either of those ways, we would ourselves become blind guides. And so how can we avoid that? Well, Jesus reminds us, doesn't he?

Any form of teaching that doesn't have justice and mercy and faithfulness at its centre is not the religion of Micah and it's not the religion of Peter and it's not the religion of Paul or James and it most certainly is not the religion of Jesus.

That's what Jesus says is at the centre here, justice, mercy and faithfulness or faith. James, in fact, is doing no more than reminding us of Jesus' own words.

Matthew 6, 12, forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors. That's the prayer, isn't it? But it's a prayer that requires an action on our part.

Forgive our debts as we have also forgiven our debtors. Matthew 5, verses 6 to 7, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be filled. I, we haven't got it already, naturally, we have to hunger and thirst for it.

[30:15] But what's the next verse? The next verse says, blessed are the merciful for they will be shown mercy. Mercy comes between justice and faith.

Faith appeals to God's mercy on the basis of Jesus, on the basis of the death of Jesus so that justice is satisfied. But you've got to make that appeal.

You've got to believe you've got to accept Jesus as king. Jesus wasn't rejecting the Jews, was he? Actually, they were rejecting him.

Look forward a bit to verse 37 of chapter Matthew 23. Jesus says, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you kill the prophets and stone those sent to you.

How often have I longed to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing. There is a sense in which the opposite of faith is being unwilling.

[31:28] Jesus was offering to gather them into the kingdom and all they had to do was believe Jesus' words and put them into practice. But they wouldn't do it.

it's the Jews who were rejecting Jesus, not the other way around. So the Jews put heavy burdens on their disciples.

But what did Jesus have to say? And I'm going to finish with these words of Jesus. I think I did too much last week so I'm going to try and be much briefer this evening.

I'm going to finish with these words. All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father.

and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. That may seem to be excluding people but in fact the next verses say exactly the opposite.

[32:45] It says come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls for my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

The Pharisees couldn't say that. I certainly couldn't stand up there and say that but I can stand up here and repeat those words of the one teacher.

Faith is to do that. To come with our weariness and our burdens and to cast them on Jesus and to say yes you are my guide I will follow you not these other leaders but that I will follow Jesus.

So let's pray that we are all able to do that this evening. As usual I'll ask Chris to come and pray for us after we've sung our last hymn.

Thank you.